

# A novel idea: a library on wheels to serve the homeless?

Since the 1980s, the [homeless population](#) in the United States [has expanded](#) due to Reagan administration policy which deinstitutionalized those deemed mentally ill, coupled with a breakdown of marriages, stagnant wages, spread of illegal drugs in cities, [increased poverty](#), and expensive housing, all putting [strain](#) on public services. In the city of Baltimore, the main library, the Enoch Pratt Free Library (herein called the Pratt Library) has a [mobile jobs center](#), [book mobile](#), and [other services](#) that [help](#) the homeless. However, [their policies](#) of no loitering, having offensive body odor, sleeping, lying down or appearance of sleeping on library premises, undoubtedly lead to [conflict](#) with those who are homeless, a population which does not have means of other individuals and may have mental illnesses. Homeless people are [sometimes](#) restricted by existing library systems, even though libraries are becoming pseudo-homeless shelters since [libraries provide](#) necessary services for these [unique library patrons](#).<sup>1</sup> While the [exact](#) number of [homeless Baltimoreans](#) is not known, [possibly numbering](#) in the thousands or tens of thousands, 90% of whom are either Black, White, or Latino, who could be [assisted by library services](#).<sup>2</sup> This blogpost, which was part of a submission which was unceremoniously rejected today by the board of *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, focuses on the idea of a library on wheels, without a fixed location, that serves homeless Baltimoreans. It is my hope that this post will either inspire individuals to create an institution like the one posed in the scenario or to improve their public libraries to be more accommodating to the homeless populations in their respective cities.

A library without a physical location has been rarely been realized beyond the efforts of the [Quaker Mobile Library](#) in London, [Street Books](#) in Portland, [Words on Wheels](#) in Texas,

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<sup>1</sup> For varied perspectives on this topic, please see the Annoyed Librarian in 2015, “[Libraries Don’t Need the Homeless](#),” a [webpage](#) about the Kansas City Public Library’s efforts, the [I Love Libraries website](#), and a librarian [writing about](#) the homeless, along with articles in [AP](#), [Book Riot](#), [Capital News Service](#), [Delaware State News](#), [Detroit Free Press](#), [Fox2](#), [Los Angeles Times](#), [National Geographic](#), [Reuters](#), [Seattle Post-Intelligencer](#), [Salon](#), [Sioux City Journal](#), [South Seattle Emerald](#), [The Guardian](#) (second article [here](#)), and [Washington Post](#) (second article [here](#), third article [here](#)).

<sup>2</sup> For more information, please see Colin Campbell’s *Baltimore Sun* articles in 2013 (“[As Winter Approaches, Baltimore Struggles to Deal with How to House Homeless](#)”) and 2016 (“[Youth Homelessness in Baltimore Higher than Previously Thought](#)”), Linda Loubert’s “[Mapping Urban Inequalities and Analyzing Homelessness with GIS](#)” in 2010 and a 2016 article in *Afro* titled “[Baltimore’s Homeless Population Continues to Grow](#).”))

Endita Kelley and her [Book Bike](#) in Los Angeles, a floating library [in Norway](#), the [Bibliomotocarro](#) in Italy, [Dashdondog Jamba](#) and his library on a camel's back, to name a few apart from mobile bookstores like the [Book Barge](#), or [bookmobiles](#) of different types, with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions even [creating guidelines](#) for "mobile libraries." Sharlee Glenn [wrote](#) about the latter in her recent nonfiction picture book, *Library on Wheels: Mary Lemist Titcomb and America's First Bookmobile*, which focused on Mary Titcomb, a librarian [who created](#) the first bookmobile in the U.S. Let us suppose there is an institution called the Baltimorean Homeless Library, or BHL for short, which allows homeless individuals access to information, like usual patrons of library, and use other resources. It would have no physical building, but have bookmobiles, colorfully painted by kids in Baltimore City schools, displaying their name, website, and other contact information, let us suppose. This institution would [hand out cards](#) with food, legal assistance, shelter, employment, and welfare [information](#) like the Baltimore County Public Library (BCPL) system. It would also, in conjunction, not charge fees for their service like the Pratt Library, would allow homeless individuals to use shelter addresses as their permanent addresses, and some members would give informational talks at Pratt Library branches, universities, and at other public institutions. With such resources at their fingertips, homeless patrons would be able to effectively participate in the U.S. society, including [creating their own books](#), which would be added to the collection of such an institution. This library on wheels would, furthermore, go to [where](#) homeless people are [living](#), whether in Baltimore's [varied shelters](#), [tent cities](#), or [wherever](#), having [social workers](#), job counselors, and licensed practitioners on staff to serve [their needs](#), including helping the homeless get [more permanent](#) places to [stay](#), be that a home or a rented space. In order to accomplish this objective it would work with the [Behavioral Health System of Baltimore](#), the BCPL system, [Housing Our Neighbors](#), [Homeless People's Action Network](#), [Youth Empowered Society](#) (YES), [St. Vincent De Paul of Baltimore](#), [Archdiocese of Baltimore](#), [Baltimore Outreach Services](#), [Health Care for the Homeless](#), [the Baltimore Station](#), [United Way of Central Maryland](#), the Interagency Council on Homelessness in Maryland, [The Journey Home](#), and the Baltimore City Government, including the Mayor's [Office of Human Services](#) and the Baltimore City [Health Department](#).

What has been outlined so far is only part of this scenario, as what would be needed is a collection development policy for the institution itself, which would serve as a way of

developing the collection of such an institution. This policy, let us say, would be modeled after [Goddard College's collection development policy](#) for the Eliot D. Pratt Library, and would be periodically reviewed and revised every two years, with input from all staff members, in order to make sure it is in tune with current trends and developments. Furthermore, this policy would support information needs of the homeless Baltimoreans by working with advocacy groups and governmental institutions, and making sure that selected materials led to social growth and information enrichment. Since such an institution would not have the resources of the Pratt Library, printed books, newspapers, and other publications would be the mainstay of its collections, but would have a few e-readers. Additionally, in order to encompass the whole swath of the homeless population, most of the materials of such an institution would be in English, but some would be in Spanish, and others would be specifically for those who visually impaired. In addition to these aspects, materials would be selected by the staff of such an institution, allowing recommendations from the served population, and weeding out any materials deemed unnecessary, ensuring that selected resources have high quality in their factual, artistic, or literary style. At the same time, the collections of this institution, let us say, would have a wide diversity of expressions and views, including the religious texts of all the world's religions, some of which may be controversial to either users or staff, even when not every idea or representation within the collection is endorsed, and any items published by hate groups listed by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) not be stocked as part of our collection or any other content deemed hateful after consulting with advocates, and other institutions. Any materials that would be damaged by bugs, by mold, or smell smoky would not be brought into the collections of such an institution, and any challenges to materials would undergo a specific procedure.

Without getting into the specifics of this institution too much, it is worth noting what its organizational structure, [based on the organizational structure](#) of the Pratt Library let us say, would look like. It would include a chief coordinator, individuals concerned with public relations and institutional enrichment, and four departments: administration, patron services, collection development, and external relations to serve its homeless patrons. Let us also suppose that this institution is a public [non-profit](#) since its startup money came from a [Mighty Cause crowdfunding](#) campaign, with those who give money to an ongoing campaign getting perks for their investment in [this effort](#), including hats, t-shirts, and tote bags. Let us also say that this institution would follow all applicable [SEC \(Security and Exchange Commission\) regulations](#)

and federal laws, including the [JOBS \(Jumpstart Our Business Startups\) Act](#), which specifically mentions crowdfunding. In the case of this scenario let us suppose that in 2017, \$100,000 would be raised from crowdfunding, and \$50,000 in projected 2018 costs. Once the transaction fees from crowdfunding, rewards to crowdfunders, crowdfunding plan, and all elements of library operations were considered, the general fund would only be \$67,812 in 2017 and \$26,124 in projected 2018 costs.<sup>3</sup>

With this scenario outlined, I hope it has given another perspective to this topic which was not deemed “academic” enough for those *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. I had hoped to publish it there, but that isn’t going to happen, unfortunately.

P.S. The original article I wrote and sent to them in early October, minus the unnecessary beginning section, which I have [uploaded to Internet Archive for your consideration](#). They claimed this wasn’t academic enough, saying I hadn’t dug into the “literature on the homeless/diverse users and libraries” and that it “reads like a paper for a lib school class,” adding that at the time it was “not a journal article in its current form, even though it may be an interesting way of approaching the issue...I would suggest that the author rework the material and ideas, do deeper scholarly research on the topic.” I did rework it, and they STILL rejected it, which annoyed me.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this topic, specifically on crowdfunding, please see “[9 Things You Need to Consider for Your Crowdfunding Budget](#)”; “[7 Crowdfunding Tips Proven To Raise Funding](#)”; “[Top 10 crowdfunding sites for fundraising](#)”; “[Top 20 crowdfunding platforms](#)”; “[The Real Cost of a Crowdfunding Campaign \(And How to Budget Correctly\)](#)”; “[6 Step Low Budget Guide to Getting Crowdfunding Backers](#)”; “[How Much Does Crowdfunding Really Cost?](#)”; “[Benefits and Drawbacks of Crowdfunding](#)”; “[How to Set Up A Crowdfunding Campaign](#)”; “[How to Choose a Crowdfunder](#)”; “[What Is Crowdfunding?](#)”; “[Crowdfunding 101: Writing a Budget](#)”; “[Crowdfunding Campaigns Come With a Growing Price Tag](#)”; “[What is Crowdfunding and how does it benefit the economy](#)”; “[The Basics of Crowdfunding](#)”; “[How to Set a Budget for Your Crowdfunding Campaign](#)”; “[What is crowdfunding?](#),” along with the small entity [compliance guide](#) of the SEC, appropriate SEC regulations as noted [here](#) and [here](#), a SEC [press release](#) on crowdfunding rules, and [specific parts](#) of the Code of Federal Regulations which mention crowdfunding.